

Psalm 2

People are Revolting!

Introduction

"You will rule them with an iron sceptre; you will dash them in pieces like pottery." Those words describe what I almost did to Ken Wong's armies one night. A number of us had gathered to celebrate a church member's 21st birthday party. Some of us sat down to play the World Conquest game - *Risk*. Unfortunately, the closest thing I could find to an iron sceptre was a large inflatable plastic hammer. That was the only thing that spared Ken Wong's armies from being dashed into pieces.

History has known some great conquerors - Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Genghis Khan and almost, but not quite one of my opponents that night of birthday celebration. It's hard to conquer the world using Australia as one's base, as one of my rivals ingloriously attempted to do. But however great these famous conquerors may have been, no one has ever been able to conquer and control the entire world or even come close to doing so. This psalm looks into the future, to the time when one of David's descendants would fully conquer and control the whole world. You get no prizes for guessing who this great king is - it is none other than the one to whom we vow allegiance and bow the knee. It is King Jesus.

Where will this great conqueror be based? In Greece, like Alexander the Great? In France like Napoleon? No! In verse 6 God tells us he has based this great world empire in Jerusalem: *"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."* In the game of Risk there is an area on the game board called *The Middle East*. The Jerusalem you can locate by longitude and latitude on a world atlas doesn't figure in Jesus' world rule any more than it does in the game of Risk. The New Testament is consistent with prophets like Isaiah, in relocating Zion, that is, Jerusalem to the heavenly city. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to sit at God's right hand and it was at this time that God installed his King on Zion, that is, in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the proper setting for our psalm. Looked at through the eyes of the apostles and the early Christians, as you will see for instance in Acts 4, it describes a world of people and leaders in revolt, who cry out, "We do not want this man to rule over us"; a hostile world which hates and rejects Jesus as Lord and King.

With this in mind let us consider first **the conspiracy** against God and the King he has appointed (1-3). Secondly, we will think about **the crackdown** on conspirators by God and his King (4-9). Finally, I will present to you **the choice** which all leaders and all people are called upon to make (10-12).

The Conspiracy (vv1-3)

The psalmist starts with the question, *"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?"* and adds, *"The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.'"*

There is great irony here. The people and leaders of the world believe God is a slave-master who puts them in chains. The last verse states the reality: *"Blessed are all*

who take refuge in him." Those who take refuge in God find him to be a gracious ruler who richly blesses his subjects.

Some quiet, gentle people I know have a son in his twenties who is rejecting Christianity. Some years back in his teens the son said he no longer wanted to go to church. They didn't pressure him. They told him what they believed but said he must make his own decision. He decided not to go to church. Since then they have prayed for him but have consciously avoided Bible-bashing. They have given him lots of freedom. Yet recently he told them that he resented the way they imposed Christianity on him. This was absurd. They had been doing exactly the opposite. But to the son it was as though his very relationship with his parents involved him being put in chains by Christianity. He wants to break free from Christianity and so now he has cut himself off from his parents who have consistently treated him with love and patience.

The psalmist asks, "*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?*" That is, "Why do people get angry with God and reject his control over their lives when he is not a slave master at all. That's the first question of the psalm: "Why have people got such a back-to-front, topsy-turvy, upside-down view of God?" Why does that rebellious son regard his gracious parents as though they were oppressive tyrants? Is there someone here who is harbouring resentment in his or her heart against the Lord? Never think of him as someone who is harsh and bossy. Don't think of him as a killjoy, someone who is out to make your life a misery.

But there's more to this question: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot *in vain?*" In other words, it's crazy to rebel against God not only because he is a good God but also because any rebellion will necessarily be futile, "in vain", that is, foolish. It is as impossible to break free of God's control as it is to live without breathing or live without eating. You can hold your breath under water for a little while, you can fast for a while, but eventually if you stay under water long enough without breathing oxygen you will die and if you stop eating you will die. If this is true of the things God has created then it is even more true of the Creator himself.

The word translated "plot" is exactly the same word that was translated as "meditate" in Psalm 1:2. In Psalm 1 we saw how the mind of the righteous person operates. In Psalm 2 we now see how the mind of most people works. The righteous ponders how to live in line with God's revealed will ("the law of the Lord"). Most people's minds are trying to get away from God and ignore his revealed will.

Conspiracy theories are as old as politics. Hitler was a master at weaving conspiracy tales. Nero concocted one to shift the blame to Christians for the burning of Rome. The religious leaders came up with a conspiracy theory to explain away the empty tomb when Jesus rose from the dead. So it goes on. Whenever a prominent person dies dramatically then a new conspiracy theory springs up. Take the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the death of Marilyn Monroe or of Princess Di.

When I was in Pakistan President Zia was assassinated. Even today the world does not know who was responsible for assassinating Zia. But when I was in Pakistan I heard plenty of conspiracy theories. Many people reckoned the CIA was responsible. Others that it was spies from across the border in India. There are those who believe AIDS was

developed as a war weapon. There are those who argue Dr. Martin Luther King was killed by the Green Berets, others by the Mafia and yet others by the criminal mastermind Raul. Most of these conspiracy theories are examples of wild imaginings and are a million miles from the truth. But right at the beginning of the book of Psalms, in Psalm 2, we are told that there is a global conspiracy - all people in the world are plotting together to break free from God's control.

The psalmist asks the question, "*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?*" and then he provides the answer: "*The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.'*" The conspiracy of world leaders leads to a conspiracy of all people. The idea is that the rulers of the world have led their peoples in a revolt against divine rule. This is why in verse 10 God speaks to the kings and rulers of the earth and not to the peoples in general. If the rulers of the earth acknowledge the legitimacy of divine rule and submit to it then it is presupposed the people will follow suit.

The issue is not one of being liberated from the rule of the kings and rulers. Clearly, if people have their way then they will be left at the mercy of God-defying kings and rulers. If you think Hitler was bad remember that Joseph Stalin masterminded the murder of over 15 million of his own people. This vicious monster once had the gall to tell interviewer Roy Howard: "We have not built this (Russian) society in order to cramp human freedom. We have built it in order that human personality might feel itself actually free. We built it for the sake of genuine freedom, freedom without quotation marks."

Ravi Zacharias describes the death of Stalin as explained by Stalin's daughter, Svetlana. As

Stalin lay dying, plagued with terrifying hallucinations, he suddenly sat halfway up in bed, clenched his fist toward the heavens once more, fell back upon his pillow, and was dead. The incredible irony of his whole life is that at one time Josef Stalin was a seminary student, preparing for the ministry. Coming of Nietzschean age, he made a decisive break from his belief in God. This dramatic and complete reversal of conviction that resulted in his hatred for all religion is why Lenin had earlier chosen Stalin and positioned him in authority - a choice Lenin too late regretted. (The name Stalin, which means 'steel,' was not his real name, but was given to him by his contemporaries who fell under the steel-like determination of his will.) And as Stalin lay dying, his one last gesture was a clenched fist toward God, his heart as cold and hard as steel.

When people follow leaders who take their stand against the Lord they place themselves under the power of tyranny. Since for us the great battle is especially a battle of the mind, we must be even more careful not to be led astray by the ideas of leading thinkers. That's why Psalms 1 and Psalms 2 go together. If you delight in God's law, if you let your mind be shaped by God's word then and only then will you will avoid the life of slavery which every non-Christian lives. If you don't know the Lord Jesus then you are indeed in bondage. But don't blame the Lord for your condition. The root problem is your own bad attitude towards God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Crackdown (vv4-9)

There will be a crackdown on conspirators. World rulers may think they are powerful but they are but "*the rulers of the earth*" (vv2, 10) and when they defy God they are taking on "*the One enthroned in heaven*" (v4). They are biting off far more than they can chew. The consequences of denying and defying God are utterly disastrous.

The Lord "*laughs*" and "*scoffs*" at his enemies (v4). I can remember when Simon was a tiny boy, say five years old. I would have play fights him. We would wrestle on the bed and I would eventually get him in a hold and he would try to wriggle out. I would pretend I was doing my best to hold him and that despite this he had managed to squirm his way to safety. If I had really decided to hold him fast it would have been utterly impossible for him to break free. How hilarious it is that my tiny son should really believe he was able to escape my clutches. It is even more ludicrous that any leader should believe he or she can escape the clutches of God.

But this is not a game like the one I played with my small son. It is a monstrous evil that leaders and people should seek to break free from God's rule. Only a strong government can be a good government. Traitors and rebels cannot be tolerated in any stable society. So we read: "*Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath*" (v5). People may "rage" against God but their anger is like the flaring of a birthday cake candle compared to the bush fire blaze of God's anger which threatens to sweep down upon his enemies: "*Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath*" (v5).

How do people express their opposition to God's rule? By rejecting God's chosen king, the Lord Jesus Christ. Psalm 2 is used in Acts 4:27 to recall how "*Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city [that is, in Zion itself!] to conspire against [God's] holy servant Jesus, whom [God] anointed*"; to recall how they crucified him. God is outraged that people should rebel against the rule of the Son he loves so much. If you dare to deny Jesus his right to control your life then you WILL suffer the consequences. And make no mistake, as Hebrews 10:31 expresses it: "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*" Whether you like it or not God has given Jesus the right to control your life. Indeed God has promised to place the whole world in his Son's hands: "*Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession*" (v8). One day, like it or not, you must bow the knee before King Jesus. Enjoy! You have no good reason to deny Jesus his right.

Remember Jesus' *Parable of the Faithless Servant*? He believed his master was a hard man and so he did not invest the money entrusted to him. The master showed himself to be wonderfully generous towards his faithful servants. But the unfaithful servant's distorted concept of his master and what he would do was tragically realised. The unfaithful servant was cast into the outer darkness. Psalm 2 is full of the same irony. The people of this world think if they let God rule their lives it will be like being shackled with iron chains. This is an evil lie. Ironically, those who fear being held by iron chains will be ruled "*with an iron sceptre*" (v9) and dashed to pieces as easily as you can smash the clay pots you put your plants in.

The Choice (vv10-12)

How should God give people the gift of the blessing of his rule?

The professor of a contract law class asked one of his better students, "If you were to give someone an orange, how would you go about it?"

The student replied, "Here's an orange."

The professor was outraged. "No! No! Think like a lawyer!"

The student then replied, "Okay. I'd tell him 'I hereby give and convey to you all and singular, my estate and interests, rights, claim, title, claim and advantages of and in, said orange, together with all its rind, juice, pulp, and seeds, and all rights and advantages with full power to bite, cut, freeze and otherwise eat, the same, or give the same away with and without the pulp, juice, rind and seeds, anything herein before or hereinafter or in any deed, or deeds, instruments of whatever nature or kind whatsoever to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding...'"

God's gift is not something as trivial as an orange. God does not speak like a lawyer. He lays it straight down the line. Here is the king I have given you. Accept my gift and experience blessing. Reject my gift and face disaster. So he says to leaders:

"Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment" (vv10-12). The choice is yours. Try to deny Jesus his right to control your life and your thinking is "in vain"; it is foolish. The wisest, smartest thing you can ever do is to put your entire life in Jesus' hands and dedicate your life to serving him.

Augustine in *The Enchiridion* commented: "For only he is free in service who gladly does the will of his Lord. And consequently he who is the servant of sin is free only for sinning." In Psalm 1 the person who experiences the goodness and security of living under God's rule is the person who **delights** in doing God's will as revealed in Torah, the Scriptures. In Psalm 2 the person who experiences the goodness and security of living under God's rule is someone who serves the Lord with joy: *"Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling"* (v11).

Ask the Lord to take your life and help you to find your greatest thrill and pleasure in doing what he wants you to do.